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ABSTRACT

This paper emphasizes the importance of avoiding stereotypes about older people in college and university centers for retirement, noting that members of centers for retirement are members of a generation recently in command. There is much folklore about older people and the aging process, and Americans tend to believe too much in the myths of aging. The sense of group denigration and deindividualization of older people is more pervasive than it has been at any time in the human life cycle since adolescence. Society tends to patronize older people, and this occurs in the university environment as well. Though there are real biological limits set upon people as they age, there are few limits to learning. It is important to take into account individual learning styles in programs for older people. Older people are different from one another, though they share certain characteristics (e.g., the biological aging process). Older people are a natural resource to be cultivated by younger people. Retirement centers offer intellectual stimuli for healthy, alive individuals. They are not places for rehabilitation but for development. (SM)

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OCCASIONAL PAPER

ED 446 548

A GENERATION IN COMMAND

Higher Education's Role In Retirement Learning

by Milton R. Stern

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Milton R. Stern

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A GENERATION IN COMMAND: HIGHER EDUCATION'S ROLE IN RETIREMENT LEARNING

by Milton R. Stern

National University
Continuing Education Association

Occasional Paper 7

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by Milton R. Stern, Dean, University Extension,
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A GENERATION IN COMMAND: Higher Education's Role In Retirement Learning

In a commencement speech 22 years ago with the same title, I argued that the generation in command was then the middle-aged, who, I said, were ages 35-65. To show how times have changed, that age range in itself was really quite startling to a mid-sixties audience. Middle-age at that point was still conceived to end perhaps at age 50, or at most, 55.

But the then generation 35-65, or at least the younger edges of it, is still here. We are survivors. Those of us who have survived, that is.

Battle-scarred we may be, but we are in command, if not as a generation altogether, then at least of ourselves. I said that in my speech two decades ago: that finally, and ultimately, the important thing was to be in command of one's self, and to be in charge of one's life.

Indeed, today, a few, even if of advanced years (and some in positions of great authority), remain in charge in the society. There are evidences beyond entertainers and entrepreneurs of great wealth and power. For example, even with the latest appointment of a 52-year-old, the Supreme Court surely reminds us that, regardless of politics, we believe that we are better served by men and women of a certain age, seasoned by years, as justices in the highest court of our country.

Indeed, many senior offices of government, in diplomacy in particular, have been and are staffed by men and women of decided seniority—I am thinking of people like Margaret Chase Smith, Arthur Burns, George Schultz, François Mitterand, Mike Mansfield, and Claude Pepper.

Aristotle said there is no such thing as a boy philosopher, and increasingly we see that, while retirement is made possible at earlier years (even 50), employment, too, is being made possible until later years, past 70.

In university retirement programs, we are dealing with at least a *recent* command generation. They are people, quite a few of whom have recently been in charge. A fundamental problem of retirement, of course, is that people of authority seem suddenly to be turned out—and without options. While this may seem to affect mostly a group of leaders, small in number, it also affects those of us who, in our work, have been followers. We have worked for somebody, for some organization, rather than having been in command.

On the other hand, those of us who have sought to conduct ourselves with some sense of purpose and self-understanding have been in charge of our own lives and have been in control of the situations which affect us. Are such people a majority of older Americans?

I am not sure. But I know that the members of our centers for retirement are a command generation. At least they have high E.Q.s (energy quotients). They have chosen us. They have chosen to come to our colleges and universities with a purpose, and that purpose is to stay in charge of their own lives *through learning*. Above all, it behooves us to recognize and respect this primary characteristic, let us call it energy, purpose, vitality—*authority*—of the group we are serving.

It is important to avoid the stereotypes about older people in college and university centers for retirement. This seems to me to be a paramount danger: Not only are we prone to the conventions of the culture, but we are susceptible just as much as members of the philosophy department or law school to the professional deformation of academics, that being an overweening confidence in our own knowledge and judgment.

What We Don't Know Hurts Other People

We do not really know much about the group with whom we are dealing. We think we do, but are we not really dependent upon the selective advice or limited judgments of a whole host of specialists—gerontologists, geriatricians, sociologists, psychologists, medical doctors, business advisors, etc.? Are we not also dependent upon a world of folklore about older people and the aging process? That folklore, in the curiously pervasive way cultures work, is by and large not only a given for younger people, it is also believed in by the subjects themselves—us—people in their 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s. We believe too much in the myths of aging—oh, not about ourselves, individually, but about other older people.

There are, of course, real biological limits set upon all people as they grow older. Even professional golfers have problems after 50. Illness is a more frequent companion, and death of others leaves us lonelier, even if we cherish younger friends. Indeed, one effect is not to talk much about the obituaries to them, but save the conversation for our contemporaries. Yet, to be alive is to function, and, as we know, there are fewer limits to learning than anything else for the old; indeed, in some ways, in certain modes, older adults learn more readily than younger people. For example, even years ago, experiments done in Britain showed that *learning by inference* was easier come by for older people than for younger ones. This is a natural consequence of everyday life, and it comes as no surprise because it simply confirms our own experience.

Does not this mean, without dwelling on the research, that we can take hold of the issue of learning in our retirement programs on a positive developmental basis? We make much of learning styles these days, and in programs for older people let us not lose sight of their importance. Let's not fall into the trap of oversimplification of curriculum. Above all, *let's not do it for them*. Without, I trust, being too professionally invidious, may I call *that* approach the "social work syndrome?"

•••

Oh, the folklore, the shared folklore of the culture! It tells us so many things, so many contradictory and silly things about older people:

They are all decrepit.
They are inefficient in their approaches.

Foolish old man, wise old man, dirty old man. Notice, not dirty old woman, but also, please note, wise old woman and foolish, too. There's little sexism past 60! In the innocent mind of the young, the old appear to be neuters.

They are all rich, poor, all dependent and a burden.

The sense of group denigration, of large-scale depersonalization, de-individualization of the older age group, is probably more pervasive than it has been at any time in the human life cycle since adolescence.

Adolescents, too, have been given their full treatment of this kind, and it's only in the last generation or so that universities have *begun* to overcome the habit of patronizing our own undergraduate students—and only after the trauma of the 1960s. Still, we—meaning a generic, cultural "we"—we still patronize older people, and I think that in the university environment, we—the local "we," faculty and administrators—are as thoughtless as people in the larger culture.

We—using the first person plural this time to mean the intimate "we"—ourselves, older people, that is—are also exploited in the university environment. Indeed, we have heard discussions of using organizations of older retired people for fiscal purposes, euphemistically, if logically, called "development"—this being offered as a basic *raison d'être* for the existence of retirement programs. This is, in my view, contra-indicated and, indeed, positively dangerous if we are to do a sound job.

Whatever else they may be as individuals or groups, if older Americans have enough sense to join a university-based retirement group, they have enough sense to leave it if it does not do what they think it should. If we are to keep alive what has begun in these programs, we must think clearly

about them and must solicit the genuine involvement of the participants. We know, as adult educators, that dissatisfied students vote with their feet. Why should these elders be different? They are not a captive audience.

I am deeply indebted to Raymond Williams*, who wrote, "Changes in convention only occur when there are radical changes in the general structure of feeling." Underneath the surface of our time, I conceive there to be such change—in that odd phrase he uses—"in the general structure of feeling." Without articulating it as yet, older people are feeling differently these days about what it is like to be older. Also, those about to be older are thinking differently about themselves becoming older. And equally, there are new ideas in the culture about the already old—not all of them pretty, either.

Part of the process of this change in "the general structure of feeling" lies in what we can do in the organizations we are building for retired people. There are other undertakings: the mammoth American Association of Retired Persons, the Elderhostel movement, and others. Each has a role, but they tend to have different agendas. Universities are only at the beginning of the task, really. And, it will be interesting to see how our plans mature. How will our centers for retirement look as the century turns? Will they be truly collegiate, *part* of university structures? Will their participants be *members* of the *university*, with an identity like those held by undergraduate and graduate students and tenured faculty? While some institutions are making attempts to absorb older students into their regular student categories, I doubt that this is a plausible alternative.

Our centers for learning in retirement are shaped in many ways. And that, perhaps, is what we are coming to learn about older people, ourselves. They are different from one another, often to a greater extent than they are like one another. They do share certain characteristics. The obvious one is the biological aging process, but that says nothing about what goes on inside, and that, obviously, must be the concern of anyone who, in all humility, seeks to establish a learning center for adults of retirement age. In my view, it is a grave error to intrude on the process in a manipulative way.

*Williams, Raymond. Culture and Society (First Edition, p. 42) Columbia University Press, New York, 1960

Let Learning Happen

Let the culture move as it must. To let learning take place, not force it, is in line with the best of educational methods and thinking, not only of our time, but of the past. I do not really believe that John Dewey invented it—*letting* learning take place. Let the people be in charge of their own learning. To the extent that we intrude on that process, the quality of the experience is lost.

The fundamental human paradox is that growth takes place from the inside. Figuratively, learning is exoskeletal. We are the new people and we periodically shed our older shells of ignorance. Oh, learning can be nurtured. I remember a line of Robert Hutchins: "Teaching, like midwifery, is a cooperative art." Gently, gently. In organizing centers for learning for older people, active directive administration seems to me to be contra-indicated. If, as an administrator, you are temperamentally unsuited to letting things happen, then I say to you, become sensitive, or your people will have a different kind of experience than the one they expect.

The poet Theodore Roethke, speaking not as poet but as a teacher to students, once said, "The cage is open; you may go."

That has potency. What was Shakespeare's line? "I am studying," says Richard II, in the Tower, "how to make my prison into a world." If you like, the whole world is a cage, is a prison, but there are larger prisons and there are smaller prisons. To the extent that those of us who live in the larger prison of this life seek to build cages within it, we make a grave error. We must say to all our people, "The cage is open; you may go." Let them be with us in this world outside. Let us not seek to shape their lives and their activities so closely that we, ourselves, when it comes our turn, must accept, must be content to move into, that small cage.

As we get older, it is easy to wrap around ourselves the same clichés we had when we were younger. Then, as we looked at older people we often thought of them as dried-up husks, physically and mentally, without novelty or originality or imagination. We may still do that, thinking, "I am not like that—the mirror lies." But if we can get rid of the clichés, if we can

fight off simplistics, we will be able to think *de novo*, freshly. We will stop thinking of the old as a problem and their education as a problem.

We older people are a natural resource to be cultivated by younger people. We are as valuable, at least, as Alaska's North Slope, and not so disruptive of the environment. We are a natural resource about which younger people had better express environmental concern, and not disturb us in ways which put us in our place, meaning, really, where they want us to be. Our collegiate organizations, our retirement centers, are not hospices for the helpless. They offer intellectual stimuli. They are for alive, healthy people. They are not places for rehabilitation, but for development—not fund raising, if you please, but *human* development. At 60, 70, or 80, think of growth, not decline. That concept is even expressed in the conventional phrase, "We *grow* old."

I believe the learning organizations we help retired people build for themselves can exemplify that idea. At the turn of the century, a dozen years from now, it is my hope to see such centers as command posts for the older generation, places where thinking goes on about what is best for that segment of the population, and even more important, for a society in which many more are older. Our vision should be not only of a place for the pleasures of learning, but also for the development of ideas and strategies to help a whole society move into new ways of thinking.

Years ago, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. said, "The reward of the general is not the bigger tent, but command."

Older or younger, that is the message for any generation in command.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following list includes NUCEA member institutions currently offering programs for older adults. The list represents the best available information to date. The NUCEA Division of Continuing Education for Older Adults is currently conducting a comprehensive survey of all member institutions to ensure that the data on programs are accurate and useful.

Program categories include:

Member-Based Programs: Programs which are run by members for members. The members select and/or teach the courses.

Fee-Based Programs: Programs for which a fee, or reduced fee, is charged, or for which fees are waived for older adults. Programs utilize university faculty and may include regular courses as well as special courses designed for older learners.

Elderhostel and Related Organizations: Programs that are part of the chain that bears the Elderhostel name are separately designated, although they may also be designated as Fee-Based Programs.

Other Programs: Programs that do not fit into the above categories, or for which there was insufficient information available at press time to classify them.

Member-Based Programs

California State University-Sacramento
Renaissance Society

Duke University
Institute for Learning in Retirement

Harvard University
Harvard Institute for Learning in Retirement

Rochester Institute of Technology
The Athenaeum

State University of New York-Stony Brook
The Round Table

The American University
Institute for Learning in Retirement

The Johns Hopkins University
The Evergreen Society

Union College
Academy for Lifelong Learning

University of California-Berkeley
Center for Learning in Retirement

University of California Los Angeles
The Plato Society

University of California-San Diego
Institute for Continued Learning

University of Delaware
Academy of Lifelong Learning

University of Lowell
Learning in Retirement Association

University of Miami
Institute for Retired Professionals

University of North Carolina-Asheville
Center for Creative Retirement

University of Regina
Seniors' Education Centre

University of Utah
Lifelong Learning

USC - Coastal Carolina College
Third Quarter

Elderhostel Programs

Adams State College
Adams State Elderhostel

Auburn University
Elderhostel

Ball State University
Elderhostel

Baylor University
Elderhostel, University for Retired People

Bowling Green State University
Elderhostel, Sage

California State University-Los Angeles
Elderhostel

Central Michigan University
Elderhostel, Pre-retirement

College of Charleston
Elderhostel

Columbus College
Elderhostel

Eastern Illinois University
Elderhostel

Eastern Montana College
Elderhostel

Gallaudet University
Elderhostel (for hearing impaired)

Humboldt State University
Elderhostel

Indiana University
Elderhostel, Mini University

Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Elderhostel

Kansas State University
Elderhostel (and numerous others)

Memorial University of Newfoundland
Elderhostel

Miami University
Elderhostel

Michigan State University
Care and Feeding of the Mind

Missouri Western State College
Elderhostel

North Park College
Elderhostel

Oklahoma State University
Elderhostel

Old Dominion University
Elderhostel, Military Career

Philadelphia College of Textiles & Science
Elderhostel

Radford University
Elderhostel

San Francisco State University
Gerontology - 60+, Elderhostel

Southern Illinois University-Carbondale
Elderhostel, Retirement Planning

Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville
Metro East Institute of Lifetime Learning

Stetson University
Elderhostel

The University of Toledo
Elderhostel

Towson State University
Senior Program, Elderhostel

University of Arizona
Elderhostel

University of Arkansas
Elderhostel

University of Illinois
Elderhostel

University of Kansas
Elderhostel, K.I.T. (Keeping in Touch)

University of Minnesota
Elderhostel

University of Montana-Missoula
Elderhostel

University of New Brunswick
Elderhostel

University of New Hampshire
Elderhostel

University of New Orleans
Interhostel, Adult Education Tours

University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
Elderhostel

University of North Dakota
Elderhostel

University of Northern Colorado
Elderhostel

University of Oklahoma
Elderhostel, Elderlearn

University of South Alabama
Elderhostel

University of South Carolina-Aiken
Program for Experienced Learners

University of South Florida
Elderhostel

University of Southern Mississippi
Listener License, Elderhostel

University of Texas at Austin
Elderhostel

University of Utah
Elderhostel

University of Wisconsin System
Elderhostel

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
Elderhostel

University of Wisconsin-Madison
Elderhostel, Programs on Aging

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Elderhostel, Guild for Learning in Retirement

Washington State University
Elderhostel, Mini University

Western Illinois University
Elderhostel

Western Montana College
Elderhostel

Wichita State University
Elderhostel, Senior Scholars

Fee-Based Programs

Anne Arundel Community College
The Senior Program

Appalachian State University
Institute for Senior Scholars

Auburn University-Montgomery
Senior University

California State University-Dominguez Hills
Fee Waiver Program

Delaware State College
Graying of the Campus

Florida Atlantic University
Mini-Term

Florida International University
Elders Institute

Mary Baldwin College
Adult Degree Program

New York University
University Seniors

Roosevelt University
Senior Citizens Discount

Universidad Autonoma de Guadalajara
Language and Culture of Our Mexican Neighbor

University of Alaska, Fairbanks
School of Career and Continuing Education

University of Chicago
Conversations with Experience

University of Maryland University College
Golden I.D.

University of Pittsburgh
College for the Over 60

University of Nebraska at Omaha
Discounts for Senior Adults

Virginia Commonwealth University
Free University for Senior Citizens

Youngstown State University
College for the Over Sixty

Other Programs

Arizona State University
Retirement Development Program

Butler County Community College
Life Enrichment

California State University, Chico
Elder College

Clayton State College
Planning for Retirement

College of St. Thomas
Center for Senior Citizen Education

Colorado State University
Noncredit Programs

Florida State University
Lifelong Learning Program

George Mason University
Senior Citizens Enrollment

Illinois State University
College of Continuing Education and Public Service

Iona College
Senior Citizen Program

Iowa Lakes Community College
RSVP

Kent State University
Senior Guest Program

Lasell Junior College
The Womens Center for Continuing Education

Millersville University
Special Program for Older Adults

New York University
Second Careers: Mid-Life & Beyond

North Dakota Division of Independent Study
Supervised High School Correspondence Study

Northern Michigan University
Older Americans Education Program

Nova University
Institute for Retired Persons

Portland State University
Senior Adult Learning Center

Smithsonian Institution
Tuesday Mornings at the Smithsonian

Somerset Community College
Living and Learning

Southern Oregon State College
Senior Ventures

State University of New York-Buffalo
Sixty and Over Audit Program

Syracuse University
Institute for Retired Professionals

Temple University
Temple Association for Retired Professionals

Texas Tech University
Retiring to a New Career

The Ohio State University
New Century Initiatives

Thomas A. Edison State College
Alternative Approaches to Degree Completion

Trinity University
Brown Bag Literary Series

University of Manitoba
Program Consultant Training

University of Missouri - Extension
National Center for Extension Gerontology

University of Missouri-St. Louis
Comprehensive Retirement Planning

University of New Hampshire
Active Retirement Association

University of North Carolina-Greensboro
Senior Scholars

University of Pennsylvania
Senior Associates Program

University of Vermont
Church Street Center for Community Education

University of Wyoming
Division of Non-Credit Educational Services

Worcester State College
Elder Outreach Program

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